

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 49 | Number 3 (Winter 1988)

pps. 296-299

Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

"Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile." *The Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 296-299.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12102>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

sales organization decided that the major locus of buyers was in non-urban areas; with only 28.1 million of Russia's 159.2 million people in urban areas, it was wise to concentrate where the market was located. This sales practice was enormously successful after 1909, and by 1913 the total number of agencies more than doubled to 3,558, of which nearly half worked on commissions. Part of the success was due to effective evaluations of where agricultural expansion was taking place, and to constricting where the market was shrinking and expanding where it was developing rapidly. When new lands opened in Siberia, International Harvester moved with the pioneer farmers and profited mightily. Also, the company learned to adapt its machines to local conditions and demands.

There is a certain irony in the effect of the two companies on one another. International Harvester admired but seemed incapable of duplicating Singer's internal operation of factory production and distribution. International Harvester, however, by modernizing Russian agriculture, provided the market for Singer among peasants by enabling the rural population to buy the machines. Both companies provided the foundation for a middle class in Russia, which unfortunately did not develop rapidly enough to avoid the catastrophic collapse of the archaic Russian economy when its back was broken during the strains of world war.

This study would be instructive for corporate managers trying to improve operations in a developing nation. Carstensen illustrates that knowing the market, dealing with its realities, and effecting gradual concepts of real service to the nation and populace involved made Singer an effective agent and provided the climate for mutually beneficial cooperation with the Russian government. He also establishes that government policy in Imperial Russia was intended to improve the lot of its farming population and to make farmers competitive in the world market. The government waited too long, however, before assisting its agricultural producers who provided the wherewithal for rapid industrial expansion.

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

EDWARD M. BENNETT

Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile, by John Hanson Mitchell. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984. 222 pp. End paper maps, illustrations. \$15.95 cloth.

At first glance, *Ceremonial Time* seems to be a book about an unremarkable square mile of Massachusetts countryside; there are no tourist attractions and no important industries. The human population of 150 is

outnumbered by cows, pigs, horses, chickens, turkeys, donkeys, dogs, and cats. Scratch Flat is, the author admits, "nowhere." But it soon becomes clear that the significance of Scratch Flat is its insignificance. Scratch Flats can be found anywhere and everywhere in America; we have all been there at one time or another. Yet there is more than meets the eye in this and other Scratch Flats, and that is what John Mitchell wants us to consider. "The place is infused with time; everywhere you look, east or west, north or south, there is history; there are stories, and ghosts, and bear spirits" (73).

Ceremonial Time is about discovering the places where we live. At first casually, and then in a more systematic way, Mitchell expands on the formal linear chronology of what he sees from his back yard. His approach and his sense of time are different from those of formal, academic history. Myth and "fact" are set side by side; the shaman and storyteller get equal time with the historian. Mitchell is not discouraged by the absence of any fame or infamy in Scratch Flat. Apparently nothing noteworthy ever happened there, and that is what he finds so intriguing: "I confess to a pronounced interest in these near-nameless individuals. They are not heroes, nor are they, as you might imagine, the muscle and blood of Scratch Flat, the work force without whose assistance the place could never yield a single bushel of produce. They are not necessarily the salt of the earth; they are not anything but individuals who lived their time and who, in their time, died. But that, it seems to me, is the real story of Scratch Flat, the real history of the world" (153).

Mitchell's approach and focus differ from those of much history we read because his most recent mentors are not the usual historians. He calls them his "guides to time." Tonupasqua is a Wampanoag medicine woman and a storyteller. Nompenekit, part Micmac, part Mohawk, is an activist in the Native American movement and an occasional visitor to Scratch Flat. More than informants, they are stern, often reproving teachers, like Castaneda's *brujo*, initiating John Mitchell into Indian life, lore, and time without beginning or end. They are, perhaps, the very last speakers of an oral tradition fifteen thousands years old, possibly older. Neither really comprehend Mitchell or his white man's sense of chronology and time, nor do they like anything he believes. Still, they come to trust him and share with him their sense of history which, from the very first meeting, Mitchell struggles to understand. Their time is synchronous, with past, present and future all coming together. "We have been here," [Tonupasqua] would say, and then she would drop her words and roll her right hand over and over in a circular pattern, extending her arm outward as she did so. The gesture was time. It said there is no time; that time goes

backward on occasion, forward on others; that it stalls out; that it skips around in a circle to catch you from behind; it is not now, or then, or to come; it simply is" (38).

Like John Mitchell, we will probably never understand this kind of time; we were not born with it, nor can we quite make it our own. But there is something for us as observers and historians in what Tonupasqua and Nompenekit call "seeing into things" or "seeing through things." "Seeing" requires a sharp eye, especially in a familiar place. One of the lessons of *Ceremonial Time* is that we are least familiar with the most "familiar" places in our lives, both outside and within us. We may "know" a geological process like glaciation or something of human nature without even noticing the moraine outside our front door or understanding our neighbors. So we wander streets and countryside, passing the familiar as casual, unseeing observers.

Seeing, then, is more than mere observing. There is that, too, especially at first when we are just learning to *see*, just becoming aware of the familiar. We begin with visual cues. In the chapter, "The Kingdom of Ice," Mitchell helps us read in the landscape clues to the origins of hills and valleys; the death of a pond and the birth of a meadow; and a river's meandering course. "Eating Scratch Flat" takes us to another level of understanding, suggesting that we might, as Mitchell did, actually live an early subsistence—hunting and gathering in this instance—predating agriculture. But the next level of "seeing into things" is more elusive, requiring of us a giant leap. To really understand the past we must feel our place in it. We try to find that place by searching the outside world, sometimes traveling great distances when, all the time, what we are seeking is inside us. Nompenekit explains to John Mitchell this inextricable bond between our outside and inside worlds which seems at once so clear and yet so hard for us to live. "'The Indian people, we're all of this, you see,' he answered, and at that point he lifted his head sharply, indicating the marshes and the dark line of the pines on the hillside beyond. 'We're made of this, the marshes here, the trees. No different, see what I mean? You don't understand this because you look on this world as something that is not you. But Indian people believe that we are no different than a squirrel or a bear, just a different form. We're all the same, squirrel, bear, me. Okay?'" (48).

Ceremonial Time does not end happily; we do not deserve it. Anyway, there are no happy or unhappy endings in nature, only endings, transitions, and new beginnings. With John we watch the torching of historical buildings, the uprooting of ancient trees, the destruction of agricultural land, the obliteration of rural America, and the death of American conscience and consciousness. He is saddened but not senti-

mental about what happens around him: "No matter where I looked, in the running walls that line the woodlands, in the folktales of the American Indians, or in the town records or verbal accounts of the area, I realized I was reading the obituary of my era. History sends out its message in any form you choose: we are the future of the past, and the past of the future" (200). Mitchell adds, "But I am learning to think in Nompenekit's Indian time, and I can tell you from my limited traveling in this area that the world around here, the world in most places on the American continent, is turned upside down. The spirits of the bear shamans have not yet been evicted" (71). *Ceremonial Time*, then, is more than just an engaging, spirited, local history. John Mitchell has given us that and much more; he has offered us a very personal but useful model for exploring, observing, and understanding not only where, but who we are.

INVERNESS, CALIFORNIA

DAVID WEITZMAN

Dubuque: Frontier River City, Thirty-five Historical Sketches, by Chandler C. Childs, edited by Robert F. Klein. Dubuque: Research Center for Dubuque Area History, Loras College Press, 1984. ix, 182 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$10.95 cloth.

As Americans spread westward across the continent, building new towns and cities, their emphasis naturally was all on the future. As the pioneer generation aged, however, a few among them always maintained a sense of history, and one or two felt the urge to set down the facts of early settlement, of the Indian culture that preceded the white pioneers, and of the young community's progress. Chandler C. Childs arrived in Dubuque in 1853, about twenty years after its initial settlement, to work for the *Daily Republican*, a short-lived local newspaper. Just four years after he arrived, in the summer and fall of 1857, Childs authored a series of sketches of Dubuque history for the paper. This was the beginning of a life-long avocation (Dubuque's city directories began listing him as "historian" in 1873). Childs saw the 1857 sketches as the basis for a more comprehensive history of his adopted community. Late in 1859 he deposited the sketches in the State Historical Society of Iowa for safekeeping along with a cover letter promising that "if time and circumstances permit" a full history would be forthcoming (161). But it was more than twenty years before the *History of Dubuque County* appeared under the imprint of the Western Printing Company of Chicago. This was, the editor's introduction explains, a "formula" local history, one of hundreds churned out in legion following the national centennial. Little of Childs's original prose survived the Chicago

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.